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The Value of Research in Recreation Fee Project Implementation

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ABSTRACT: In a survey of Forest Service managers responsible for implementation of recreation fee programs, research skills were perceived to provide little benefit to business or communications planning. A majority of managers reported, however, that they used research data they collected or contracted for when developing and implementing their fee programs. They rated the usefulness of that information very high relative to other sources used. Few reports of formal studies prior to fee implementation suggest that a substantial part of the research that occurred was very casual in nature. Since implementation, most managers are not collecting any information to help evaluate success or failure of the fee program to accomplish program objectives.

KEYWORDS: Business planning, recreation managers, evaluation

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Introduction

The USDA Forest Service's Recreation Fee Demonstration Program has received a generally favorable review by the U.S. General Accounting Office (1998). Nonetheless, the GAO pointed out several unresolved issues including greater understanding of equity issues, consistency in programs, and the need for additional research.

A Forest Service team of scientists and managers recently worked together to determine how often and in what ways research information had been used in the development of required business plans for existing fee projects. The results are intended to provide input into how future business planning can be improved through better incorporation of research.

Methods

In a survey of all Forest Service fee project managers (Absher, 1999), key questions about business planning, communication efforts, fiscal issues, agency support, and use of research data were investigated. A set of 24 questions was developed and administered in the fall of 1998 to managers of all 63 approved and operational fee projects. Site managers were sent the

set of questions and given a minimum of one week to gather pertinent information prior to a follow-up phone call to obtain their answers. Responses were entered into a database and analyzed using Excel and SPSS software.

Results

There were 60 respondents, representing 55 of the 63 Forest Service "sites." Thus, this attempted census achieved an 87 percent success rate. The five "extra" questionnaire responses are due to the fact that one site contained five administratively distinct sub-projects. These were reported separately because information about their separate experiences could not be easily combined into one questionnaire. Also, it should be noted that replies were received from all regions of the country and 58 different National Forests.

Data analysis focused on two broad questions: (1) did managers value research information and/or conduct of original research on forest users, and if so, (2) what types of data did they collect and use?

To address the first question, respondents were asked to "rate skill and knowledge areas in terms of how beneficial they would be to creating effective business or communication plans" (see Table 1). Nine distinct areas were listed alongside a four-point rating scale from 1 (very beneficial) to 4 (not at all beneficial). The highest rated (most beneficial) by average scores were "knowledge of the resource" (1.32), "public relations/interpretive services" (1.34), "business planning" (1.45), and "fee collection methods" (1.49). The lowest rated item was "research," with a 2.14 average. Research is also the only skill to contain a substantial proportion (32 percent) of "little" or "no" benefit ratings.

Table 1
Ratings of business and communication plan skills from question: "Rate the following skills and knowledge areas in terms of how beneficial they would be to creating effective Business/Communications Plans. (Circle one number for each area: 1=very beneficial, 2=moderately beneficial, 3=little benefit, 4=not at all beneficial)."

Perceived benefit of:	1	2	3	4	Ave.
Knowledge of Resource	45	10	3	1	1.32
Public Relations/Interpretive Services	40	16	2	0	1.34
Business Planning	34	22	2	0	1.45
Fee Collection Methods	34	21	4	0	1.49
Accounting/Financial Analysis	31	24	4	0	1.54
Pricing Strategy	28	27	2	1	1.59
Compliance/Enforcement	26	25	4	4	1.76
Safety	18	30	7	3	1.91
Research	14	25	14	4	2.14

To address the second question, managers were asked "...how useful each of the following data sources was for developing or implementing your Fee Demo Project." Thirteen separate data sources were listed (Table 2). The response scale was from 1 (highly useful) to 4 (not at all useful) and a separate column was provided to indicate if they "did not use" a given source. Average scores are based on those who reported that they did use a given data source.

Table 2
Responses to questions about usefulness of data sources: "Tell us how useful each of the following data sources was for developing or implementing your Fee Demo Project. (Circle 1=highly useful, 2=moderately useful, 3=low usefulness, 4=not useful at all, or Did Not Use for each data source)."

Usefulness of:	Usefulness rating 1	2	3	4	Ave. rating	Did Not Use	Total n
Primary or survey data—data we collected (or contracted for) ourselves from forest users or some other group	25	15	4	0	1.52	15	59
Informal input from the public	26	27	5	0	1.64	2	60
Forest Service data	28	21	8	0	1.65	3	60
Personal communication with community leaders or well-informed citizens	25	25	7	1	1.72	2	60
Formal public comment	12	22	7	1	1.93	17	57
Formal public meetings	7	14	4	1	1.96	33	59
Letters to the editor/Local media coverage	14	25	10	7	2.08	7	60
Other federal or state agencies	11	21	14	1	2.11	13	60
Secondary data—data collected by someone else for some other purpose that could be used for our Fee Demo Project	10	19	13	1	2.12	15	58
Reports or papers from a researcher or consultant (including Universities)	9	15	8	3	2.14	24	59
Chamber of Commerce information/ statistics	4	14	5	3	2.27	33	59
Travel Bureau/State Tourism agency	6	16	10	4	2.33	24	60
U.S. Census data	1	0	6	3	3.10	49	58

The top-rated item (average of 1.52 on the scale, n 44) was "primary or survey data—data we collected (or contracted for) ourselves from forest users or some other group," which was mentioned as highly or moderately useful by 40 of the 44 (91 percent) who used that source. This was rated above "informal input from the public" (1.64, n 58), and "Forest Service data" (1.65, n 57), although these sources were used by almost all of the 59 respondents to this question. Note also that 15 of the 59 respondents (25 percent) indicated they did not use primary or survey data as an information source.

Looking at the responses to the same thirteen data sources and considering which were used least, U.S. Census data were used by 10 of 59

respondents (17 percent) and were the lowest rated of all sources (3.10 average, or close to "low usefulness" point). That was followed by "chamber of commerce information/ statistics" and "formal public meetings," which were rated at 2.27 and 1.96, respectively. Two additional sources, "travel bureau/tourism agency" information and "reports or papers from a researcher or consultant," were used by more than half the project managers, i.e., 35 of 59, or about 59 percent. The usefulness ratings of these two sources were 2.33 and 2.11, respectively, or near the "moderately useful" point on the scale.

Managers were asked if they, or someone they contracted with, had collected and analyzed data on any of six data-driven tasks associated with fee implementation (Table 3). The most common uses of research were for estimating fair market value and the amount users were willing to pay for services. The least common use was to describe market segments or user groups.

Table 3
Use and analysis of primary and secondary data.

Marketing or data analysis task:	%"did"	n=
Fair market value of services offered	66.1	59
Amounts users were willing to pay for services	60.7	56
Attitudes toward fees on public lands	52.5	59
Assessing current or future market conditions for outdoor recreation	50.0	60
How users were likely to respond to fees	48.2	56
Determining the market/targeting particular user segments or groups	36.6	60

Finally, the fee demo managers were asked whether any "formal studies or other research reports had been done" that they "used or had access to when planning or implementing their fee demo project." About 57 percent (34 of 60) said "no," in contrast with the earlier finding that 75 percent of the managers had used some sort of primary or survey data they had collected (or contracted for) when developing or implementing the fee program. The suggestion is that at least some of the primary or survey data was not obtained through "formal" studies. When asked if any formal studies had been done since the fee project was initiated at their site, 75 percent (45 of 60) said "no."

Discussion and Conclusions

To summarize, these managers rated research as the lowest item in the list of beneficial skills and knowledge areas, with nearly one-third of all managers (18 of 57) rating it as having little or no benefit to the task of creating effective business or communication plans. On the other hand, managers who actually used primary or survey data (44 of 59) rated it as highly useful, even though some primary data used may have been obtained in a casual fashion, with little evidence of systematic research at the planning stage. About two-thirds of managers used primary and secondary data

sources to obtain fair market value or willingness to pay estimates for services offered. Finally, many fee project managers reported that no research was conducted either during planning and implementation (57 percent) or afterward (75 percent).

The evidence above seems to suggest that the lack of reliance on research may be based on a paucity of direct firsthand experience or expertise, rather than other causes such as disaffection with research or its outputs. Although we offer no additional information to resolve this issue, it might be speculated that managers may see little benefit in initiating the research process because scientific expertise may not be readily available to them, or they may find the process expensive, slow, or daunting. Managers seem to use whatever information they have easily at hand. Researchers, whether they are agency scientists, associated with universities, or in the private sector, may have a very important role in future fee project planning and implementation. Especially useful might be techniques to guide pricing, assess visitor attitudes, and describe market conditions. Perhaps the high usefulness rating of primary or survey data relative to other sources was because such information is the most site, or National Forest, focused. Researchers would do well to find ways to market their skills directly to fee project managers in practical and simple ways, thereby breaking down any perception of a lack of benefit while providing more of what was seen as quite useful, namely, data about users or prospective users. Concomitantly, FS managers might look to generating stronger ties to the research community in order to obtain and use the "useful data" they seek.

The most "readily available" data, such as FS use data, census statistics, or tourism information, were either not consistently used or were seen as not very useful when obtained. Coupled with low utilization of primary or secondary research, this suggests that managers may often satisfy their information needs with anecdotal, informal, or experience-based information. Scientific research apparently is not yet a formal part of the fee demonstration enterprise, nor is it a part of the standard "marketing" tasks that fee projects involve. Thus, the benefits available from scientifically valid research seem to be largely unachieved. As the next wave of fee project managers work on the tasks of developing and implementing business plans for their sites, they will gain (if they do not already have it) an appreciation for the techniques of market analysis and the use of survey research. Whether the use of research is developed as individual professional competencies or skills available agency-wide, it needs to be embedded in the larger processes of fee project implementation and evaluation.

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